

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000945

SIPDIS

E.O.12958: DECL: 1.6x1

TAGS: CASC ASEC PREL PTER EPET NI

SUBJECT: Evaluating the Terrorist Threat to U.S. Oil Workers in Nigeria

Ref: TD 315/21866-03

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason:  
1.5(c)

¶1. (SBU) The Mission understands that consideration is being given to issuing a revised travel warning for Nigeria to make specific mention of a possible terrorist threat to U.S. oil facilities in Nigeria. Given the dated and speculative nature of the possible threat, the Mission strongly urges the Department to consider carefully and fully the implications of taking such an action.

¶2. (SBU) The Mission's two EACs (Embassy Abuja and Consulate General Lagos) met during the week of May 19, and concluded that the information contained in the referenced report did not warrant issuance of a warden message or revision of the existing travel warning for Nigeria to make specific mention of a possible terrorist threat to oil facilities. U.S. oil companies operating in Nigeria and American citizens living here are acutely aware of security issues, and possible threat emanating from within and outside Nigeria. The possibility of an attack similar to those perpetrated against the U.S.S. Cole and the French tanker is clear to U.S. oil company managers, and they ensure security awareness of their personnel through in-house newsletters, emails, and other media.

¶3. (SBU) The oil-producing Niger Delta is a rough neighborhood. Security incidents involving aggrieved Nigerian employees or disaffected local inhabitants are not unusual. U.S. and other companies operating in the area maintain a constant state of vigilance. While a terrorist attack would be qualitatively different from an extortion attempt, many of the measures a company would take to deter the former are the same as those that would be taken to reduce the chances of the latter. And, again, the companies are aware that their facilities could be the target of a terrorist attack.

¶4. (S/NF) Let us be clear about the quality and timeliness of the information contained in the referenced intelligence. The source is someone whose reliability is unknown and who might have reason to confuse or misdirect us. Moreover, the source "recently recalled" a conversation from the year 2000 that the source had with a senior Al-Qaida figure, in which the senior Al-Qaida figure said he had sent someone to Nigeria for an unspecified purpose that might have been surveillance of oil installations. The source does not know that the Al-Qaida envoy conducted any surveillance in Nigeria, much less that the target of the surveillance (if there was any) was oil installations. All the source really knows (if the source is reliable, and, of course, we do not know that) is that the journey took 45 days.

¶5. (SBU) The crucial question we need to ask is: "What do we know as a result of this new information that we did not know before?" We in the Mission do not believe we know anything more of substance. The follow-on question would be: "What can we say to the oil companies that would help them be better prepared than they already are for a possible attack?" We in the Mission believe they are already as prepared as the state of our current knowledge would warrant; we should not unnerve them with speculation cloaked in the guise of actionable intelligence, especially intelligence that gathered nearly three years ago.

¶6. (C) In an email dated 24 May 2003, DS/ITA said it "strongly feels that updating the travel warning solely / solely on this one threat report would not / not be sound. Not appropriate. ...it was confirmed

that the threat information was outdated and very speculative in nature. However, DS/ITA does feel (stating the obvious) that U.S. oil companies / offshore oil rigs in Nigeria will always be "high profile" targets. As noted in previous emails, U.S. oil companies completely understand the security environment in which they operate."

17. (S/NF) The Mission agrees. Were we to issue a warning about a possible threat to oil installations, we would have to provide context, i.e., that the information is three years old and of questionable reliability. If we did that, the U.S. oil companies would wonder why we bothered. Being less specific (e.g., the original tearline for the referenced TD: "As of early May 2003, Al-Qaida may have been considering attacks against U.S.-flagged oil tankers and U.S. oil companies in Nigeria") risks leading our fellow citizens and U.S. oil companies to conclude that we have something new or "hot." Risk-averse shipping and insurance companies would also wonder what we know. We could see tankers refuse to call at Nigerian ports and/or sharp rises in insurance rates for tankers and rigs. U.S. economic interests and the employment prospects of some AmCits in the industry could be at risk. Do we want to run those risks on the basis of "outdated and speculative" information? We think not.

18. (C) In conclusion, the Mission agrees with DS/ITA. Unless we have something more than the referenced TD and the recent worldwide caution -- something current and specific to Nigeria, we believe U.S. oil companies in Nigeria are sufficiently concerned about and most of their AmCit employees adequately aware of the global terrorist threat to U.S. oil interests. Because their security-consciousness is so high, any warning other than one that makes clear how dated and speculative the information is risks being confusing and misleading rather than enlightening. If the Department has information that would tend to confirm the referenced TD, the Mission would like to receive it, so that the EACs might consider it.

19. (SBU) The Mission is in the process of updating the Travel Warning for Nigeria. We would like to defer submission of a new text until after June 4. By then a week will have elapsed since the Presidential inauguration, and we will have a better idea of the overall security climate.

JETER